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ABSTRACT

The concept of "prominence" in intonation is discussed. It treats the prominence of a syllable as a feature determined by the speaker separate from the word itself, and meaningful in and of itself. The decision by a speaker to assign or not assign prominence to a syllable (selectivity) is seen as related to the immediacy of spoken language and to the sense assigned to that word. (MSE)

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IMPROMPTUNESS AND INTONATION

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Impromptuness and Intonation

Abstract. The concept of *prominence* (as characterized in Brazil, Coulthard and Johns, 1980) is discussed in relation to the real-time aspect of spoken communication. Its significance is explicated in terms of the way the speaker *projects* a here-and-now state of understanding in which particular words either do or do not constitute a *sense selection*. Other intonational features are touched upon; and an examination of the unit that provides their domain is proposed, as one way of relating segmentation problems to the linear presentation of speech.

I want to offer some thoughts on impromptuness as a feature of verbal communication from the point of view of someone whose particular interest is in the intonation of English. I put it this way, referring to 'impromptuness' as a general condition of such communication, rather than speaking of an identifiable variety of 'impromptu language', advisedly. One of the things that an engagement with the communicative value of intonation compels one to take seriously is the fact that utterances are typically produced in real time and decoded in real time. It quickly proves impossible for anyone investigating this area to ignore the way the substantive events that constitute speech are organized in linear sequence. In this respect intonation encourages a quite different theoretical stance from that adopted by those who investigate the apparently-hierarchical structuring of syntax. Although linguistic orthodoxy has given little recognition to the fact, there are many questions of both a theoretical and a practical nature that can scarcely be formulated satisfactorily without reference to some kind of step-by-step model. There is no need to labour the point that they include questions with which many of the other contributors to this symposium are centrally concerned. For them, as for me, there seems to be a need for a descriptive enterprise which does justice to the wholly pragmatic nature of much linguistic behaviour: that is to say an enterprise geared to capturing the way speakers make moment-by-moment adjustments to a constantly changing state of conversational play. It is this fact of accommodation to the here-and-now that I shall take as my working definition of impromptuness.

Obviously, a paper about intonation must focus upon the spoken language. A study of what happens when people read aloud does, in fact, suggest that the present approach has relevance to some aspects of the organization of the written word, but this cannot be enlarged upon here. Neither can the likelihood that observable consequences of impromptuness will usually be less in evidence in writing than in speech. If it should prove heuristically useful to postulate a distinction between language which *is* impromptu and language which *is not*, the distinction will presumably rest upon observations of what those consequences are. It may then turn out that a *reader's* intonation owes less to special nonce decisions that reflect a semi-private state of speaker-hearer understanding and more to a consideration of the pre-arranged, and so publicly-available text – a circumstance which would certainly be in line with how the spoken/written and impromptu/prepared dimensions of variety might be expected to be related. My position, for the purposes of this paper, is that the consequences of impromptuness must first be examined.

I do not have the space to expound at length the descriptive framework within which my approach to intonation has been developed. I can only say that my claim that the fragment of analysis given here is valid is part of a larger claim that the framework provides a coherent and tenable view of the meaning system realised by intonation. The need for a concise treatment also dictates that I use manufactured examples to make my points, instead of referring directly to the very large amount of naturally occurring data from which my descriptive categories are derived. I shall confine my attention mainly to a single meaningful opposition in the intonation system. This will be sufficient basis for discussing a number of matters that I take to be interesting. It will allow me, moreover, to avoid assuming much more phonetic expertise than the ordinary dictionary-user is commonly credited with.

The dictionary entry for a word like *controversial* assigns 'secondary stress' and 'primary stress' to certain syllables as follows:

^{2}contro^{1}versial

In other words there is 'primary stress' only:

con^{1}tain ; ^{1}conduit

I shall not dwell upon the phonetic correlates of either of these 'levels of stress' as they are manifested in the citation forms of the words. Instead, I shall take it that people can both produce and recognize them, and go on to propose that *both* be referred to as *prominent syllables*, a proposal that is encapsulated in the following conventions:

CONtroVERsial ; conTAIN ; CONduit.

The justification for lumping the two together as a single category and postponing consideration of how they differ is the fact that the syllables thus characterized as *prominent* are meaningfully opposed to all others that are not, an assertion that will be expanded presently. Meanwhile, it is necessary to recognize that prominence is not a property of the word, but an attribute of some functional stretch of speech. This can be seen in the differential distribution of so-called primary and secondary stress when the words occur in context. We might, for instance, hear,

CONtroVERsial
a CONtroversial deCISion
the deCISion was controVERsial
VERy controversial inDEED

Controversial has two prominent syllables only when it is spoken out of context. Under these circumstances, both prominences that seem to be usual in a particular kind of pattern are compressed into a single word. In other circumstances it may have only one or none. This is not to suggest, of course, that there are any circumstances in which the syllables of *controversial* are not differentiated in a way which might be heard as differing 'degree of stress'. The objection to speaking of 'tertiary' – and perhaps other – levels of stress in this connection is that the resultant scale conflates two phenomena that ought to be kept separate. Whatever distinguishes *con-* and *-ver-* when neither is prominent is a residual feature of the word. Prominence is a feature whose distribution results from a speaker-decision quite separate from those he takes in assembling the lexis of his utterance. As a separate decision, it is separately meaningful.

The practice of speaking of stress as variation on a single dimension is a legacy of Bloomfieldian structuralism and its insistence on a 'meaning-free', phonetic, analysis. One of the starting assumptions of the present approach is that, until we have at least a working hypothesis about what is in meaningful opposition with what, we cannot know which of the many variables any utterance exemplifies to pay attention to. A consequence of adopting this position is that the received distinction between 'stress' and 'intonation' gets re-examined, the phenomena I have identified as prominence being shown to realize part of what I shall refer to as the intonational meaning-system.

Looking into the meaningful consequences of assigning or not assigning prominence is, I believe, an exercise highly relevant to understanding more about the now-coding aspect of speech. Consider, first,

the TENTH of MAY , or MAY the TENTH

as specimens of the two-prominence pattern that CONtroVERsial typifies. Either is a possible response to some such question as "When's your birthday?" We can provisionally associate the fact that both *the* and *of* are almost certain to be non-prominent in both responses with the fact that there is no possibility of a different word in the slot occupied by either. Compare this state of affairs with that obtaining at *tenth* and *May*, where the word represents a *selection* from a set of up to thirty-one possibilities and twelve possibilities respectively. But note that the limitation on the exact number of possibilities here derives not from the nature of the language system (as it does in the case of *the* and *of*) but from the extra-linguistic fact of how certain human communities have decided to organize their calendar. A distinction can be made between the *existential paradigm* – that set of items that are actually available at any place when all the here-and-now circumstances – including non-linguistic circumstances – have been taken into account, and the *general paradigm*, the (usually much larger) set that the language system makes available. Allocation of prominence can then be shown to carry the meaning that the item in question is selective in the existential paradigm.

Consider now

The tenth of what?	the tenth of MAY
Which day in May?	the TENTH of May

The responses are now of the one-prominence pattern typified by conTAIN and CONduit. The fact that in the second of the two the 'nuclear' or 'primary' stress is 'moved' is of no interest for the present, since selectivity is associated with all prominent syllables. What these examples demonstrate is that if the preceding discourse (part of the total environment of the utterance) removes the possibility of selection in the relevant existential paradigm, then either *tenth* or *May* will probably be produced without prominence if they are included in the response at all. (Perhaps the most likely responses would really be "May" and "The tenth" respectively, with non-selective words omitted.) For another manifestation of zero choice in the existential paradigm, consider

TOM dick and HARry
KNIFE fork and SPOON,

where it can commonly be assumed that anyone hearing the first and last member of the trio will not entertain the possibility of there being anything but *Dick* or *fork* in the intermediate slot.

The picture suggested by this handful of examples over-simplifies reality in at least three important respects. In the first place, I have made my points by supposing that the utterance in question occurs *after* some circumstances or event that determines what is selective and what is not: choice is eliminated by the terms of a question, or by a culture-wide familiarity with the expression "Tom, Dick and Harry". Where this situation actually exists, it is possible to say that the non-selective item is "predictable". But utterances do not, characteristically, simply reflect a pre-existent situation. They rather *project* a situation on the assumption that it will be acceptable to the hearer. In her critique of work on the so-called Nuclear Stress Rule, Schmerling cites the pair of sentences:

(i) The text if very good, but page 27 contains a lousy footnote.
(ii) The only mention he makes of my work is a lousy footnote!

The treatment she expects for the final noun phrase, in her notation and in mine, is

(i) a[2] lousy [1] footnote ; a LOUSy FOOTnote
(ii) a [3]lousy [1] footnote ; a lousy FOOTnote.

her general point being that these variant forms are not predicted by the NSR (Schmerling 1976). Seen from the point of view of existential selection, *lousy* in (i) seems likely to attract prominence, since a text which was no mote than 'very good' could conceivably contain a footnote which was excellent; but in the world that (ii) projects, there is an understanding that if there's only a footnote referring to the speaker, then it cannot be other than lousy. It seems to be a characteristic of genuine expletives that they are presented as non-selective: compare

DON'T be a bloody FOOL
a BLOODy HANDkerchief

When intuition seems to attach a particular phonological shape to a particular lexico-grammatical item, we can usually attribute it to the discourse conditions the item most characteristically projects. Compare

(i) THREE tall TREES, and (ii) some TALL TREES.

If the first occurred in real discourse it would probably project an expectation that once the three trees have been identified (as some kind of landmark, perhaps) their tallness will be self-evident: there is no group of three trees that are *not* tall. The second would be more likely to occur in a situation in which *tall* was an essential distinguishing feature. The possibility of there being trees that are not tall is acknowledged, but such trees are expressly excluded from the scope of the expression.

To say that *tall* is non-selective in (i) is clearly not to claim that it can be 'predicted' as a constituent of the utterance by any conversationally-involved hearer. The notion of predictability is even less useful for explicating examples like

the PRESident's been shot

Certainly the hearer is not expected to be able to predict *shot* if such an

assertion occurs – as it easily might occur – at the very beginning of a conversation. It is rather that, by projecting a conversational state in which a hearer's interest in who's been shot now can be permanently relied upon, the speaker achieves the impact of saying, in effect, ". . . this time it's the President!" (Compare the rather similar effect of the conversational opener: "Who do you think has been sacked/promoted/convicted of shoplifting/etc.?") The impact is lost if both *president* and *shot* are presented as selective: the PRESident's been SHOT.

A second refinement of the notion of selectivity can be appreciated by glancing again at the second of Schmerling's example. It is very likely that other epithets than *lousy* would have much the same value in the context she proposes. If we persist in thinking of 'word selection', we may very well have to admit to the existence of some such existential paradigm as ". . . a lousy/miserable/wretched/ etc. footnote." In saying that absence of prominence signals no selectivity, we are not here saying that there is no other word available, but that a situation is projected in which there is *no other sense* available, any other words that might fill the shot being existential synonyms of *lousy*. Notice, moreover, that the self-same lousy footnote might be short or lengthy, critical or approving. Non-selective *lousy* does not necessarily exclude any of these. To say that its non-prominent treatment projects an understanding that it *cannot be other than lousy* is to recognise that selection is confined to a single *sense dimension*. It happens that, in the example used above, both *tenth* and *May* are words which uniquely realise particular senses: *ninth* can never be used as an existential synonym for *tenth* nor *June* for *May*. Neither can any word other than a numeral fill the *tenth* slor or any but the name of a month fill the *May* slot. (In saying all this, we are ignoring the marginal possibility that one might give one's birthday as "The Ides of March", or even "April Fool's day", but these involve no new principles.) In many cases, however, words are not reckoned to be in a permanent and publicly-recognised relationship with a sense. They contract here-and-now relationships with each other in a way that could never be predicted from an examination of anything we may postulate as the abstract lexical organisation of the language. If the speaker assumes an ongoing understanding that short footnotes are lousy, then *short* and *lousy* are existential synonyms. If, on the other hand, the assumption is that lengthy footnotes usually treat of

matters that ought to be incorporated in the text, so that only short ones are excusable, then *short* and *lousy* might be incompatible members of the same existential paradigm. To understand the factors which determine how a speaker distributes prominent syllables, it is necessary to think of him as making moment-by-moment assessments of how sense dimensions are presently constituted; or, more accurately, moment-by-moment judgments as to how he can safely *represent* them as being constituted.

Replacing the notion of word selection with that of sense selection makes it possible to deal with a third matter that the provisional statement of the prominence/selection equation overlooked. This is the fact that prominence is an attribute of the syllable, not the word. Since *tenth* and *May* are monosyllables, it was easy to gloss over any consequences there may be of confusing 'prominent word' with 'prominent syllable'. In practice, this inconsistent use of terminology creates fewer problems than might be supposed because of the empirical fact that, when English words are used in discourse, a single prominent syllable is usually enough to specify an existential sense uniquely. This need be demonstrated only sketchily, since it bears only indirectly upon present concerns. In

the FOURteenth of FEBruary

it is easy to see that *-teenth*, *-ru-*, *-ar-* and *-y* are non-selective in all contexts, in the same way as *the* and *of* are. Even when the language system allows selection at a syllable that is normally non-prominent (as for instance in the pair BIRTHday and BIRTHright) it is rare for the choice actually to exist in any real set of discourse conditions. Notice that different considerations apply to

the TWENty-first of MAY,

which projects as assumption that *first* is non-selective. In many contexts it is, and when it is not, the alternative form

MAY the twenty-FIRST

is available to project a different assumption. But when someone is asked by a stranger to state his birthday, it would be usual for both *twenty* and *first* to be selective. (There is a chance of its being the twenty-second/third/etc. or the twenty-first). We should then expect both to be prominent:

the TWENTy-FIRST (of MAY), or (MAY) the TWENty-FIRST

It would be rash to suggest that orthographic convention consistently treats as hyphenated forms those items that need often to realise two sense selections and represents as real compounds those which commonly realise only one (e.g. BIRTHday). It would be surprising, though, if there were not some correlation between orthography and this central fact of phonology.

Of more immediate interest is the problem presented by the need to suggest a suitable phonological shape for

the TWENty-FIRST (of MAY), and (MAY) the TWENty-FIRST.

The citation forms referred to at the beginning of this paper provided two patterns for a functional unit, one having a single prominent syllable and one having two. It is not widely recognised that nearly all naturally-occurring discourse can be represented as a concatenation of units having one or other of these shapes. To enlarge upon this, we must now acknowledge the distinctiveness of the 'nuclear' or 'primary-stressed' syllable that has so far been discussed only in terms of its functional similarity to other prominent syllables. If this is marked by underlining, and taken to be the last (and sometimes the only) prominent syllable in its unit, then we can fairly confidently predict

// the TWENty-*FIRST* // of MAY //

rather than

// the TWENty-FIRST of *MAY* //,

or

// *MAY* // the TWENty-*FIRST* //

rather than

// MAY the TWENty-*FIRST* //

So regularly is the upper limit of two prominent syllables observed that it is possible to ascribe special communicative significance to the occasions when it is not. Making projections of what will, and what will not be selective in a given conversational nexus presupposes that there *is* such a nexus for the utterance to mesh with. Language samples, produced simply as samples, clearly cannot make projections of this kind. When a unit has more than the expected two prominent syllables, it can often be heard as an embedded sample or 'quotation' for which the speaker takes no personal responsibility. Compare

// he HOPES to be with us the *NEXT* time we meet //

and

// he HOPES to be WITH us the NEXT time we *MEET* // ,

where the implication that the present speaker is doing no more that repeat the form of words used by the third party would often have overtones of scepticism. It is fairly easy to attach such a local meaning to this item, but rather less so to distinguish the consequences of saying ones birthday is on the //TWENty-FIRST of *MAY* //. Here, quoting the date as a pre-coded chunk is a perfectly effective way of answering the supposed question, and one which would probably have no special conversational repercussions. There are other ways in which *oblique orientation* can be recognised (that is to say orientation towards the language sample rather than towards a hearer). Although the distinction would seem to be a crucial one for an appreciation of how much speech seems to oscillate between 'impromptu' stretches and ready-made, semi-ritualised, stretches, we have to live with the fact that the formal differences are often neutralised (because there are, in fact, no more than two potentially prominent syllables that could provide the formal evidence) and that saying-what-you-mean and quoting-the-form-of-words-that--encapsulates-what-you-mean often amount to much the same thing.

The boundary symbol, //, is not to be taken as meaning that there is necessarily any phonetic manifestation of a boundary. Often there is, but

I hold the view that the study of precisely what happens between units, and in particular the study of pauses, should be quite separate from the business of segmentation. Segmentation involves consideration of paradigmatic choice, for the unit to be described is of interest only in so far as it is the domain for an identifiable set of such choices. Whether there are overt markers of a boundary or not, the unit that the present approach defines can be shown to be the place of operation of three separate speaker opinions, what I have called *tone*, *key* and *termination*. I believe that together these three account for most, if not all, the either/or variation that others have regarded as comprising 'intonation'. The communicative value of choices in each of the three systems needs separate, and extended, explication. All I can say here is that each has to be conceptualised in terms of the projections the speaker makes about the here-and-now state of speaker/hearer convergence. Study of the whole intonation system, therefore, provides access to the mechanisms whereby the essentially pragmatic business of interactive discourse is managed. Its formalisation is achieved by further elaboration of the conceptual framework I have sketched in to account for the distribution of prominence.

One further area of interest can be opened up by re-examining

// the TWENty -*FIRST* // of *MAY* //

The simple requirement that units should have no more than two prominent syllables would permit

// the *TWEN*ty // FIRST OF *MAY* //.

Most people would probably agree, however, that the second version would be unlikely to occur. We may speculate that the reason for this is that it would be easy to say ones birthday was on the twenty-first and then add – as an afterthought, perhaps – that it was in May; the second (unlikely) version does not represent anything like such a plausible division into 'first approximation' and 'afterthought'. One reason for ending a unit and beginning a new one is the need to select afresh in one of the three systems. If a motive exists for doing this, then boundaries may occur anywhere. If, however, all the choices are identical in the units on either side of the boundary, the decisive factor seems to be what we can loosely speak of the scope of forward

planning. Without trying to relate the observation to any psychological or neurolinguistic theory, we can say that there are certain stretches of speech that are far less likely to be 'preassembled' piecemeal than others, a fact which seems to correlate closely with the propensity of boundaries, not otherwise motivated, to occur. Unless there is a different intonation selection after the boundary, we do not usually find divisions in stretches like

He SEEMED ANgry ; I'm HOPing to SEE her;
She PUT it on the SHELF

though there is nothing unusual about

He LEFT // ANgry ; I'm WAITing // to SEE her ;
She FOUND it // on the SHELF

It is possible, of course, to relate such observations to a grammatical description of the item concerned. The generalisation we need to make to account for this aspect of a speaker's behaviour seems, however, to require reference, not to syntactic constituency as such, but to a fairly simple notion of what does and what does not constitute a credible increment in whatever forward-planning process the speaker is engaging in. Sentence grammars generally make no explicit recognition of this distinction, but there are many reasons why it could be said to be a quite crucial distinction for anyone interested in the real-time generation of speech. One further reason why a syntactic account is likely to lead us astray can be mentioned. If the boundary is made unlikely in *He seemed angry* by the relationship between the verb and its complement, then we shall expect the same to apply to *He really did seem angry*. But

He REALly did *SEEM // ANgry*

is an unexceptional utterance. I can offer nothing more than speculation about the constraint which seems to limit the forward-moving increment to a maximum of two sense selections, but examples like this suggest that it has greater psychological reality that the rules that sentence grammars abstract for us.

The precise relationship between syntactic and intonational phenomena has, I think, been obscured by an accident of history: none of the currently productive linguistic models took intonation into account *ab initio*. The assumption has always been that it could subsequently be accommodated by an extension of the apparatus required for the description of the contextless and unintoned sentence. The most interesting studies in this area have been those that have sought to establish a statistical relationship between intonationally-defined units and syntactically-defined ones (as, for instance Quirk *et al.*, 1964). And what is interesting about them is that in no case have correlations of anything approaching 100% been found. This suggests one of two things: either the bases on which a speaker makes his intonation decisions are different from those on which he makes his syntactic decisions; or the principles encapsulated in grammars that describe context-less sentences are not those that can be said, in any operational sense, to constitute the speaker/hearer's knowledge of the language. Investigation of intonational meaning has to assume the former possibility, the system being represented as a quite separate set of meaningful oppositions, which contribute in some kind of 'parallel channel' arrangement to the communicative value of the utterance. If my earlier characterisation of impromptuness is an acceptable one, then it would seem that the second possibility – that there is an alternative way of handling both intonational and syntactic facts which does not abstract away from context and which does not give up on the crucial matter of linearity – is due for serious consideration.

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